Research in the Black Ghetto: a Review of the Sixties

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The image of the United States which dominated social thought in the fifties was that of the affluent homogeneous mass society. The end of ideology had been proclaimed and social critics seemed mostly concerned with conformism in suburbia. The state of race relations seemed to be a problem largely confined to one section of the country, the South, and it tended to be conceptualized mainly in the legalistic terms of desegregation. Then, in the sixties, came the rediscovery of conflict, poverty and ethnicity. A war on poverty was begun, the civil rights movement became transformed into one of black power, and there were riots in large northern cities where huge areas had become black ghettos. No longer could one use the ideas of the fifties in characterizing American society and identifying its problems.

The thrust of social research is necessarily in some way related to the general intellectual climate in the society where it is conducted. As the United States went from the fifties to the sixties, the social sciences may have had some influence in causing the changes in the perception of society, but even more significantly, these changes called forth a new interest in problems and research orientations which had been absent, dormant, or in other ways neglected in the preceding period. The body of research which I will review here is one which is to a very great extent a product of this new climate. It had no counterpart in the fifties; and if there are indications that it will not have one in the seventies either, this is to suggest once more the discontinuity between the decade which we recently passed through and that in which we are now.

I refer to the studies of black life carried out in northern ghettos, by researchers who might be either anthropologists or sociologists in terms of professional identification but who went about their work in a way which tends to be regarded as typically anthropological: i.e., as participant observers in which researchers get directly involved in ongoing everyday events in the ghetto community and thereby achieve a reasonably well-rounded picture of its way

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of life. It is this style of working, rather than a shared theoretical perspective, which makes me refer to the studies involved as "a body of research."

It may seem curious that the studies to be discussed here, little more than a handful, should be deemed a particularly unusual contribution to knowledge about one sector of American society, since race relations have clearly been a major field of study from the very beginning of American social science. A closer look at that field, however, reveals that a close-up view of black life has not in fact been achieved with any great regularity. Much of what has passed for knowledge about black life has been arrived at by way of studies from a distance, such as analyses of official statistics of welfare agency case materials, or by way of piecemeal investigations of isolated problems, comfortably handled through survey methods not requiring intensive, long-term involvement with the black community. Only in the thirties and early forties, in a period of social ferment which in some ways may have been like the sixties, was there a concentration of studies which gave anything like a picture of black life as a whole, including such works as Johnson's _The Shadow of the Plantation_ (1934), Dollard's _Caste and Class in a Southern Town_ (1937), Powdermaker's _After Freedom_ (1939), Frazier's _The Negro Family in the United States_ (1939), _Deep South_ by Davis, Gardner and Gardner (1941), and _Black Metropolis_ by Drake and Cayton (1945). But as the titles indicate, most of these dealt with the South. Black Americans had not yet become to such a great extent a northern urban people.

Moreover, much of the research on race relations does not focus on the black community at all. The black American has often been the "invisible man" in his country, to use the title of Ralph Ellison's novel, and to a surprising extent this has been true even in a field of research where one would expect him to be conspicuous. One prominent example is that most celebrated of all studies in the field, Myrdal's _An American Dilemma_ (1944). The dilemma in question is, after all, a white dilemma; Myrdal gives primary attention to "what goes on in the minds of white Americans." Of more than 1300 pages in this massive compendium, hardly more than 30 are devoted to the black life to which the researchers of the sixties have devoted most of their attention.

To be sure, problems of American race relations cannot be understood without regard to the operation of white mainstream America. It would be a mistake, however, to see black Americans only as a passive party in either maintaining or changing these relations; yet to some extent American social science seems to have succumbed to such a perspective in much of the literature. In 1963, before the pattern of the sixties had crystallized, one leading American sociologist, Everett C. Hughes, asked, in a presidential address to the American Sociological Association, why sociologists had not foreseen "the explosion of collective action of Negro Americans toward immediate full integration into American society" (Hughes 1963: 879). A few years later, he might have asked why they had also failed to foresee the growth of black separatism. Part of the answer

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2 See for instance recent overviews of the field by Lyman (1972) and Vander Zanden (1973).